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MONDAY, JANUARY 24TH, 1853.

THOMAS ROMNEY ROBINSON, D. D., PRESIDENT,
in the Chair.

THE seal of a Bishop of Leighlin and Ferns was presented by W. H. Hardinge, Esq.; also, a pewter cast of a bulla of Honorius II., and some fragments of ancient earthenware smoking-pipes, found near Drogheda; presented by J. T. Rowland, Esq.

Dr. Todd made the following communication to the Academy on the notices which occur in various writers, of the power said to be possessed by the Irish hereditary bards, of *rhyming rats to death*, or causing them to migrate by the power of rhyme. Allusions to this curious superstition are very frequent in writers of the Elizabethan age, and the following century. Shakespeare, in *As you like it* (Act iii. sc. 2), puts into the mouth of *Rosalind* the following reference to this Irish legend :

“ *Celia*. But didst thou hear, without wondering, how thy name should be hang'd and carved upon these trees ?

“ *Rosalind*. I was seven of the nine days out of the wonder before you came ; for look here what I found on a palm tree ; I was never so be-rhymed since Pythagoras' time, that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember.”

The commentators on this passage of Shakespeare have collected several parallel passages from writers of the Elizabethan age, in which allusion is made to this superstition. Ben Jonson, for example, in his *Poetaster* (Epil. to the Reader) says :

“ Rhime them to death, as they do Irish rats,
In drumming tunes.”

And Randolph in the *Jealous Lovers*:

“ And my poets

Shall with a Satire steep'd in vinegar
Rhime 'em to death, as they do rats in Ireland.”

Archdeacon Nares, in his Glossary, quotes the following verses from “ *Rhythmes against Martin Mar-Prelate* :”

“ I am a rimer of the Irish race,
And have already rimde thee staring mad ;
But if thou cease not thy bold jests to spread
I'll never leave till I have rimde thee dead.”

Sir William Temple, in his *Essay on Poetry*, has the following passage :

“ The remainders [he is speaking of the old Runic] are woven into our very language. *Mara*, in old Runic, was a goblin that seized upon men asleep in their beds, and took from them all speech and motion. Old *Nicka* was a Sprite that came to strangle people who fell into the water. *Bo* was a fierce Gothick captain, son of Odin, whose name was used by his soldiers when they would fight or surprise their enemies : and the proverb of rhyming rats to death came, I suppose, from the same root.”

Reginald Scot, in his *Discoverie of Witchcrafte*, p. 35 (ed. 1665), says: “ The Irishmen affirm that not only their children, but their cattel are, as they call it, eye-bitten when they fall suddenly sick, & tearm one sort of their witches eye-biters, only in that respect: yea and they will not stick to affirm that they can rime either man or beast to death.”

And Dean Swift, in his witty and ironical “ Advice to a Young Poet,” (having quoted Sir Philip Sidney), says :— “ Our very good friend (the Knight aforesaid), speaking of the force of poetry, mentions rhyming to death, which (adds he) is said to be done in Ireland ; and truly, to our honour be it spoken, that power in a great measure continues with us to this day.”

The passage to which Swift has alluded occurs in Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* :—“ Though I will not wish unto you to be driven by a poet's verses, as Bubonax was, to hang himself, nor to be rhymed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland,” &c.

Dr. Todd stated, that having met with these passages, he called the attention of Mr. Eugene Curry to them, and requested him to make search in our ancient Irish manuscripts for such notices of the alleged powers of Irish rhymers as might throw light on this superstition. The following paper contains the substance of what Mr. Curry has collected on the subject.

The antiquity of satire in Ireland is, according to our ancient writings, of a very remote date. In the early ages of Christianity it appears to have been so frequent and so much dreaded, that the “Brehon Laws” contain severe enactments against it, and strict regulations regarding its kind, quality, and justice, something like the law of libel of more modern times.

Several references to ancient satires and satirists will be found in the Preface, by Dr. John O'Donovan, to a low, scurrilous poem on the native and Anglo-Norman noblemen of Ireland, written at the close of Queen Elizabeth's reign, and lately published by John O'Daly, of Dublin. The most interesting in its results, and perhaps the most authentic, of these satires mentioned by Dr. O'Donovan is that composed by the poet Laidginn (not Athairne of Binn Edair, as Dr. O'Donovan by an oversight has stated). The story is preserved in the Book of Ballimote, in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, and the following is a literal translation of it:

“Eochaidh, the son of Enna, king of Leinster [having been for some time at Tara, as an hostage from his father to Niall of the nine hostages, monarch of all Erinn], absconded and repaired to the south to his own country. He decided on

visiting the house of Niall's poet laureat, Laidginn, the son of Barcead, to refresh himself, but on arriving there he was refused entertainment. He proceeded home then, but soon returned with some followers to the poet's house, burned it, and killed his only son. The poet for a full year after that continued to satirize the Leinstermen, and to bring fatalities upon them, so that neither corn, grass, nor foliage grew unto them during the whole year. In the meantime the poet so worked up the feelings of the monarch Niall, that he vowed to march with his army into Leinster and lay it waste, unless the young prince Eochaidd was delivered up to him again, to be dealt with as he should deem fit, in expiation of the double insult and violation which had been offered to the sacred persons of himself and his poet. This vow he immediately carried into effect, and the King of Leinster, being unable to offer any effectual resistance, was compelled to deliver up his son as he was commanded. The young prince was conveyed to Niall's camp, at Ath Fadat (now Ahade), on the river Slaney (about three miles below Tulla), where he was left with an iron chain round his neck, and the end of the chain passed through a hole in a large upright stone, and fastened at the other side. Shortly after, there came to him nine champions of Niall's soldiers, for the purpose of killing him. This is bad indeed (said he) at the same time giving a sudden jerk, by which he broke the chain. He then took up the iron bar which passed through the chain at the other side of the stone, and faced the nine men, and so well did he ply the iron bar against them, that he killed them all. The Leinstermen, who were in large numbers in the neighbourhood, seeing their prince at liberty by his own valour, rushed in, led by him, upon their enemies, and a great battle ensued, in which the monarch was routed, and forced to retreat to Tulla, and ultimately out of Leinster, closely pursued, with great slaughter, by the Leinstermen."

Although this story is doubtless exaggerated, and has the appearance of a legend, it is, nevertheless, in all probability

lity, founded on fact; for Mr. Curry, in 1841, with a copy of the story in his hand, visited the scene of this ancient battle, and found on the field a remarkable confirmation of the fact that a great slaughter had there taken place in very remote times. Not having then seen Ryan's History of the County Carlow, he was quite unaware of the existence at the present time of the "Hole Stone," mentioned by that writer. However, in moving along the road which runs parallel with the river from Tulla to Ahade, and when near to the latter place, he espied the identical flag-stone lying at the north end of a small field of wheat close on the left-hand side of the road, with a large lime-kiln nearly opposite, on the other side of the road. Having thus unexpectedly come upon the neighbourhood of the site of the battle, he proceeded a short distance forwards, to where some men were at work, at the same (left-hand) side of the road, trenching up a small field to a great depth, to get rubble limestone for burning, with which the soil seemed to abound. This appearing to him a fortunate circumstance, he turned into the field, and inquired of the men if they had discovered anything remarkable in their excavations. They answered immediately, that they had found the field full of small graves, at a depth of from eighteen to thirty inches below the surface, and they showed him some which had not been yet closed up. The graves were formed, generally, of six flagstones,—one sometimes at the bottom, four at the sides and ends, and one, sometimes more, to cover them in. They were from three to four feet long, one and a half broad, and about three feet deep. Every grave contained one, two, or more urns, bottom down, covered with small flags, and containing minute fragments of burnt bones and black ashes or mould.

Mr. Curry succeeded in procuring two of the urns in a perfect state. They were made of materials superior to such urns in general, and very neatly manufactured, and are now

in the valuable collection of Dr. Petrie. But to return from this digression.

Several instances of this alleged power of the Irish bards of rhyming to death not rats only, but even Lords Lieutenant of Ireland, are collected by Dr. O'Donovan, in the Preface to Angus O'Daly's Satire, already mentioned, p. 17, *seq.*

The following is an instance given by the Four Masters at the year 1414, in which an unpopular Lord Lieutenant was rhymed to death by the Irish bards:—"John Stanley, Deputy of the King of England, arrived in Ireland, a man who gave neither mercy nor protection to clergy, laity, or men of science, but subjected as many of them as he came upon to cold, hardship, and famine." Then, after mentioning some particular instances, especially his having plundered Niall, son of Hugh O'Higgin, the annalists proceed to say:—"The O'Higgins, with Niall, then satirized John Stanley, who lived after this satire but five weeks, for he died from the virulence of their lampoons."

The most ancient story of rhyming rats to death in Ireland is found in an historico-romantic tale, entitled "Imthecht na cPom Dáimhe;" "The Adventures of the Great Company." The history of the Great Company is this:—On the death of Dallan Forgaill, the chief ollave, or poet of Erinn, about A. D. 600, Senchan Torpest, a distinguished poet of Connacht, was selected to pronounce the defunct bard's funeral oration, and was subsequently elected to his place in the chief ollaveship of the kingdom. Senchan forthwith formed his establishment of bardic officers and of pupils in the art of poetry, &c., on a larger scale than had been known since the revision of the bardic institution at the great meeting of Dromceat, some twenty years previously. As chief poet of Erinn, he was entitled to make his visitation, with his retinue, of any of the provinces, and to be entertained during pleasure at the court of the provincial kings; and the honour

of being so visited was sought for with pride and satisfaction by the kings of Ireland.

Seanchan having consulted with his people, they decided on giving the distinguished preference of their first visitation to his own provincial king, Guairè the Hospitable, king of Connacht. They were received hospitably and joyfully at the king's palace, at the place now called Gort, in the county of Galway. During the sojourn of Senchan at Gort, his wife, Bridget, on one occasion sent him from her own table a portion of a certain favourite dish. Senchan was not in his apartment when the servant arrived there; but the dish was left there, and the servant returned to her mistress. On Senchan's return, he found a dish from his wife's table on his own; and, eagerly examining it, he was sadly disappointed at finding that it contained nothing but a few fragments of gnawed bones. Shortly after, the same servant returned for the dish, and Senchan asked what its contents had been. The maid explained it to him, and the angry poet threw an unmistakeable glance of suspicion on her. She, under his glance, at once asserted her own innocence, and stated at the same time, that as no person could have entered the apartment from the time that she left until he returned to it, the dish must have been emptied by *mice*.*

Senchan believed the girl's account, and vowed that he would make the mice pay for their depredations, and then he composed a metrical satire on them. Of this we have but two and an half quatrains, of which the following is a literal translation :—

Mice, though sharp their snouts,
Are not powerful in battles ;
I will bring death on the party
For having eaten Bridget's present.

* *Luch* is the generic name, and is qualified by *mor*, big, as *Luch Mhor*, a big mouse, or a rat. The modern *Francach*, literally a Frenchman, now used for a *rat*, is not found in any ancient Irish document known to the writer.

Small was the present she made us,
 Its loss to her was not great,
 Let her have payment from us in a poem,
 Let her not refuse the poet's gratitude !

You mice, which are in the roof of the house,
 Arise all of you, and fall down.

* * * * *

“ And thereupon ten mice fell dead on the floor from the roof of the house, in Senchan's presence. And Senchan said to them : It was not you that should have been satirized, but the race of cats, and I will satirize them. And Senchan then pronounced a satire, but not a deadly one, on the chief of the cats of Erinn, who kept his princely residence in the cave of Knowth, near Slane, in the county of Meath.”

To enumerate the various instances of the power of satire to be met with in the ancient records of Ireland would extend this communication to an inconvenient length. The power was very generally supposed to be most efficacious in its application to rats ; and the following story, which Mr. Curry relates from his own knowledge of some of the circumstances, shows that the superstition has existed down to our own times.

“ About the year 1776 a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, named John O'Mulconry, became a convert to the Established Church, and was appointed curate of Kilrush, in the county of Clare. He was descended from the branch of the O'Mulconry family, who were hereditary satirists and poets ; and, notwithstanding his apostacy, was still much respected by the Roman Catholic inhabitants of Kilrush and Kilferagh, in the latter of which parishes, near Kilkee, he was in the habit of officiating on all Sundays. The burying ground of Kilferagh Church was at this time so infested with rats that serious accidents occurred there at interments, from the anxiety of men to kill them, and of the women to fly from them, as it was said that of bodies newly interred nothing but the bones remained after one day. It was generally believed and

whispered about, that Father John O'Mulconry, as the people still called him, was endued with the hereditary bardic power of banishing the rats by satire. In the meantime an interment took place, at which the Rev. gentleman himself officiated, and seemed horror-stricken at what he saw. This was in the autumn of the year ; and in a few days after, an honest respectable farmer, named John Foley, who lived at Querin, about four miles to the east of the Church of Kilferagh—the end of a large bog intervening—was out on an early morning to look after his cattle and his corn-fields, which skirted the same bog. While thus engaged, he noticed a rather thick and low fog or mist, confined to a narrow breadth, but extending in length almost across the bog. Surprised at such a phenomenon, he stood to observe it more closely ; but his surprise was soon increased when he perceived it moving directly towards him, and with remarkable velocity. He immediately thought of his hitherto invisible neighbours, the fairies ; and, thinking it would be as well not to stand in their way, he ran as fast as he could to get out of their line of march, which, having succeeded in doing, he turned to have a view of them. But his surprise was much greater at seeing in this mist a long compact train of rats, numbering hundreds of thousands, and crushing to the ground everything in the way of plant or shrub that opposed their progress. They quickly climbed over the walls or ditches of John Foley's corn-field, which was nearest to the bog, and passed straight through it, entering another and another of his fields in direct succession, and trampling to the ground the corn to the full breadth of their front, which was several yards. They passed on then through Querin, directly to the flat, low accumulation of sand which is called Querin Head, and which forms within it the handsome fishing-cove of Querin, about six miles below Kilrush, on the Clare side of the Shannon, and about five miles from Kilferagh Church. Having reached the ‘ Head,’ they immediately buried themselves deep beneath the dry sand ; there they re-

mained some time without molestation ; but the green sandy surface above them being the usual place for the herring fishermen of the Cove to spread their nets out to dry, the vermin soon began to gnaw and tear their nets to such an extent as to force the boatmen to abandon the place altogether, though at a great inconvenience. The sudden disappearance of the rats from Kilferagh, and their equally sudden appearance at Querin Head, soon became the talk of the country far and wide, and it was then remembered by several persons, who were present at the funeral at which Father John O'Mulconry officiated, that he had said on that occasion, that the rats should soon depart from Kilferagh ; nor did he deny, when talked to on the matter, that they had been satirized and banished by him. In the meantime men crowded from all parts of the country to see the extraordinary rat-burrows at Querin Head. But the vermin soon took it into their heads to try their teeth on the bottoms of the boats in the creek, and their depredations of this kind became so serious that there was a meeting of the men of the parish held on the chapel-green of Dunaha on a Sunday evening, to consider what means should be taken to get rid of the nuisance. Here it was determined, that after mass on the Sunday following, all the young and able men of the congregation should go in a body to Querin Head, with spades, sticks, hurlies, &c., dig up the 'Head,' and kill and totally extirpate the colony of rats. The day came, and about one hundred active men, with a large crowd of spectators, repaired to the 'Head' and forthwith commenced operations. It was some time before they started the *game*, but suddenly, as if by concert, the enemy made their appearance amidst such a suffocating, blinding cloud of sand and sea-fowl feathers as stunned the besiegers for a moment. Soon, however, sticks, hurlies, spades, and feet were at work, and thousands of the vermin were left sprawling and crushed on the field of battle. Still their numbers appeared to suffer no diminution, and after their first surprise was over, they began to crawl

and climb up the legs, thighs, and bodies of their assailants in such numbers, and with such pertinacity, as to force them to give way and retreat ingloriously from the battle-field, fully convinced that the action of the rats was governed by an influence against which human force was unavailing. What became of the rats after this day, or how long they remained at Querin Head, I cannot say; but I have often heard my father, Owen Mor O'Curry, William Macguire, and Denis Macgrath, three of the most expert rat-killers with the stick in the parish, and who were at Querin Head on the occasion, talk with wonder and fright of the scene in which they were engaged. And these were not men who were frightened at seeing their own precious blood copiously following the application of well-balanced, well-directed ‘shillelaghs’ to their own living skulls. No, they were men well accustomed to give and take in that agreeable way.

“It is a common tradition in Limerick, and not older than my own boyish days, that when ships were found dangerously infested with rats, there were men to be found then who came and placed an open razor in a fixed position on the ship’s deck, and compelled all the rats in her to come in succession—I do not know by what agency—and rub their throats to the razor’s edge so as to kill themselves.

“There are people still in the west of the county of Clare who pretend to possess a form of satire for the *banishment* of rats. One man, Thomas Keane, land surveyor, now living near Kilkee, told me, about the year 1820, that he had thus banished one or more destructive rats from his mill and house at Belahaglass, near Dunlicky Castle, on the Kilkee coast. It must be remembered, that the rat satire was always composed in rhyme, and in the most obscure and occult phraseology of the Irish language. Having myself a small inkling of the rhyming propensity, I tried my hand at a satire on rats, in the house of a friend at Kilkee, in the year 1820, but I fear the words I made use of were too *hard* for the vermin to un-

derstand, or that I had not the true inspiration, as, certainly, they paid not the slightest regard to the notice to quit which I then gave them.

“ Martin, in his Tour to the Western Isles, says, that the ancient race of the Island of Rona was, about the year 1700, all destroyed in the following manner:—First, a swarm of rats, none knows how, came into the island and eat up all the corn. In the next place, some seamen landed and robbed them (the people) of what provisions they had left, and all died before the usual time of the arrival of the boat from Lewis.”

The President read a paper on the probable errors of the eye and ear in transit observations.

“ Among the important applications of the Electric Telegraph which every day is producing, none is more interesting to those who pursue physical inquiries than its power of making time-determinations with a precision and facility which promise ere long to supersede the existing processes. In its very first application to determine longitudes by making the clock of each station beat its time at the other, its immeasurable superiority was at once revealed; and though it has not been as completely established in the more ordinary operations of the Observatory, yet that is only an affair of a few years. One of these seems specially to invite it,—the determination of right ascension; and already Mitchel and, I believe, others have obtained results which appear to surpass those hitherto obtained by the transit instrument.

“ The principle is this: the clock, by a well-known apparatus, prints on some fit surface a series of equidistant dots by the successive vibrations of its pendulum. Between any pair of these the observer can interpose a dot at the instant of a phenomenon, and its place, with respect to them, gives the time. This reduction can be made at leisure, as the record is permanent, and a scale of any reasonable magnitude can be